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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV PHUM TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: GOVERNMENT COUNTERSTROKE AGAINST DEEP
STATE -- FORMER GENERALS ARRESTED

REF: A. ANKARA 1170

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1167

[1](#)C. ANKARA 680

[1](#)D. ANKARA 313

Classified By: Pol-Mil Counselor Carl Siebentritt, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On the morning of July 1, Turkish police arrested up to 24 individuals associated with the so-called "Ergenekon gang," under investigation for conspiring to topple the government. Among those arrested are two retired four-star Army generals: Hursit Tolon, former First Army Commander, and Sener Eruygur, former Army Chief of Staff, later Jandarma Commander, and current president of the Ataturkist Thought Association. These are the most senior retired officers arrested for any reason in recent memory and bring to 73 the number detained since January in the Ergenekon investigation. In a web site posting prior to the arrests, the Turkish General Staff (TGS) strongly denied persistent press reports of a military conspiracy to undermine the Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. The arrests come on the day the Chief Prosecutor is presenting oral arguments in the AKP closure case before the Constitutional Court. They represent a serious escalation in the battle between the government and the "deep state" being waged through the judiciary and will significantly increase political tensions as the AKP closure case heads towards a climax. The true breadth of the Ergenekon conspiracy will only become apparent as indictments are unveiled. End summary.

Ergenekon Arrests Include Senior Retired Generals

[1](#)2. (U) As many as 24 persons were arrested July 1 in Ankara and Istanbul in connection with the on-going "Ergenekon" investigation into anti-government activities. Among the detainees were Hursit Tolon, former First Army Commander, and Sener Eruygur, former Army Chief of Staff, later Jandarma Commander, and current president of the Kemalist Ataturkist Thought Association. The president of the Ankara Chamber of Commerce, Sinan Aygun, and chief editor of the daily Tercuman, Ufuk Buyukcelebi were also reported detained, as was Cumhuriyet's Ankara bureau chief Mustafa Balbay. In an unusual step, the two retired generals were picked up at their residences on a military-controlled compound. According to press reports, police searched the offices of

the Ataturkist Thought Association, the Ankara Chamber of Commerce, and the Cumhuriyet newspaper's Ankara bureau on the morning of July 1 and conducted similar searches in Istanbul on the orders of the Istanbul prosecutor. Today's arrests are in addition to up to 49 other persons detained in relation to Ergenekon since late 2007.

¶3. (C) Tolon and Eruygur are the most senior military officers to have been detained in recent memory. Eruygur was implicated as a coup plotter in the "secret diaries" allegedly written by former Naval Forces Commander Admiral Ornek and published by the newspaper Nokta in the spring of 2007 (ref a). According to Nokta's excerpts from the diary, Eruygur was initially involved in planning a coup along with the then commanders of the Army, Navy, and Air Force, but the plan was opposed by CHOD Hilmi Ozkok. Nokta was shut down after publishing the story. Eruygur's Ataturkist Thought Association was the key organizing force behind a series of massive public nationalist, secular rallies around the country in the spring of 2007 in the failed effort to engender popular opposition to the election of Abdullah Gul as president.

¶4. (C) Former TGS lawyer and retired colonel Sadi Cayci, now part of the secularist ASAM think tank in Ankara, told us that the police must have had warrants to make the arrests and search the military residences, and that subsequent indictments will shed more light on the strength of the government's case against the two generals and the others. Cayci characterized the detentions as a show of determination by the government that would certainly exacerbate the tensions between the "Islamists and the patriots." He noted that, if the alleged crimes were committed after their military service, Tolon and Eruygur would be tried in a civilian court.

¶5. (S) Previewing the arrests, a senior Turkish National Police (TNP) contact told Embassy LEGATT last week in the context of a discussion of the Paksut-Basbug meeting controversy (ref b) that the TNP was going to strike back by making Ergenekon arrests within the next few days.

¶6. (U) Initial reactions include a denunciation of the arrests as "fascism" and political intimidation by the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP). Cumhuriyet's Ankara editor complained that earlier Ergenekon suspects have been detained for up to ten months without charge. Implicitly referring to the secularist defense of judicial privilege in the closure case against the AKP, AKP Vice Chair Dengir Mir Firat stated that the will of the judiciary should be respected. AKP Diyarbakir MP Abdurahman Kurt denied a link between the arrests and the AKP closure case, but emphasized Ergenekon and the recent arrests are significant because "coup plotters" are being prosecuted for the first time. He noted previous "transformation" efforts in Turkish history, such as during President Menderes' term in the 1950's, provoked a reaction from establishment forces that led to a coup. "The public won't stand for that any more," Kurt claimed. AKP is not challenging the establishment with these arrests; it is pursuing democracy, Kurt said. "Things won't happen overnight but today's developments are important because coup plotters are being held accountable for the first time."

¶7. (C) Meanwhile, there is little information available on the substance of the charges likely to be made against the Ergenekon arrestees. Media reports over the past months have variously linked Ergenekon suspects to the murder of Turkish-Armenian journalist Hrant Dink, the attack on the Danistay judges in May 2006, a bombing aimed at the Cumhuriyet daily, and the Article 301 ("insulting Turkishness") cases against Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk and Elif Safak. A gag order imposed by an Istanbul court in March 2008 has restricted the amount of reliable public information available as the government's investigation has proceeded.

Military Warns Against Slander Campaign

¶8. (U) In a seven-paragraph statement posted on its web site on June 28, before the arrests, (Embassy translation forwarded separately to EUR/SE), the TGS denied persistent press reporting that it had developed a comprehensive public disinformation plan to undermine the governing AKP. Calling the charges a "slander campaign" which has been conducted for an extended time by the media, the TGS predicts that "multidimensional and systematic activities" aimed against the Armed Forces would continue in the future. It ominously warns that such activities are being closely monitored. The statement denies the existence of an antigovernment "Information Support Plan," and dismisses the notion that such a document could have been created and published without the knowledge and approval of senior officers. Commentators have noted that many of the actions laid out in the plan, allegedly leaked to the press by military sources, have indeed occurred over the past months.

Comment

¶9. (C) The Ergenekon arrests, while expected since the investigation into the role of former military and prominent civilian figures began in early 2008 (ref c), have occurred the same day that the Chief Prosecutor is presenting oral arguments in the AKP closure case. Few here see this as a coincidence. The move represents a serious escalation in the battle between the government and the "deep state" being waged via judicial proxies. The government is now under pressure to demonstrate the strength of the criminal cases against the Ergenekon plotters as formal indictments are expected to be made public in the coming days.

¶10. (C) The arrests will significantly increase political tensions here as the AKP closure case plays out over the coming weeks. While the arrest of prominent journalists looks like muzzling of the press, the Tercuman chief editor and Cumhuriyet Ankara bureau chief are widely regarded as mouthpieces for the alleged military and Kemalist plotters. Many of those arrested are virulently anti-AKP and may well be engaged in anti-government activities, but how guilty they are or complicit in a sustained and serious conspiracy against the government will only come clear as the indictments are made public.

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WILSON